

Draw the line on hate crimes

By Harun Yahya

Dictionaries define the word 'hate' as 'the feeling of ill-will and resentment towards someone,' and it is occasionally used as a synonym of 'disgust.' In many works, hateful remarks are described as "hate speech" while crimes motivated by hatred are characterized as "hate crimes." Hate crimes, as also defined by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), are committed against an individual or a group due to reasons that may arouse prejudice such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, physical or mental disabilities and gender.

Usually expressed in the form of violence, hate crimes can also manifest as harassment, threats, or bullying at school or at work. In addition, judicial authorities consider the use of offensive brochures and posters featuring insulting and threatening elements within the scope of hate crimes.

What sets hate crimes apart from other types of crimes is the fact that it essentially targets the "individual's identity." However, individuals or communities are not the only targets of hate crimes; public buildings such as mosques and churches or the properties of minorities are as well. In such cases, the crime generally takes the form of vandalism, arson, bombing or looting. Attacks on property can also be seen as messages of contempt, insults or threats. Muslims and blacks have been determined to be the groups who generally suffer the most from said attacks. It has been also noted that attacks against said groups are on a steady rise.

Although legislation provides definitions about hate speech and hate crimes, hate crimes remain one of the most controversial fields of law.

The first issue regarding hate crimes is whether it should be regarded within the scope of freedom of expression. The freedom of expression, one of the most fundamental personal rights as well as a requirement of democracy and human rights, is the individual's freedom to address others.

That being said, many democratic countries have placed limitations on the freedom of expression and imposed a ban on hate speech. That is because modern states encourage the free expression of opinions and ideas on one hand, while trying to protect all segments of society on the other. The political and legal grounds for banning hate speech are to provide both security and assurance to vulnerable communities in a democratic society.

States are bound to maintain a balance between securing freedoms and protecting individuals. The most basic way for states to achieve this balance is to foster an individualistic awareness and morality that does not breed hate speech when left free.

Another major issue with hate crimes is that it is often quite difficult to determine if hate is the motivating factor behind the crime. One of the most significant examples is the event that took place in January 2015 in Chapel Hill, USA, when three young Muslims were shot dead by their neighbor after a dispute over a parking space. The neighbors and wife of the perpetrator – Craig Stephen Hicks – claimed that the murders were not committed for religious reasons. However, Hicks' Facebook page featured many anti-religious posts and comments. The houses of the victims, all of whom were Muslims, were also covered with marks of the shooting. These facts aroused suspicion that the crime was in fact a hate crime. In such cases, identifying the motive behind the crime is crucial, as many countries impose harsher punishment for crimes where hate is the motivating factor.

Hate crimes are a type of crime that stretch beyond borders and elicit restrictions on fundamental freedoms such as education and travel of individuals who are members of the groups targeted by the crime. Therefore, countries either take stricter law enforcement measures or increase the penalties for the aforementioned crime. However, such measures still fall short in preventing further hate crimes.

The ever-increasing sentiment of hate among people poses a serious threat for society in general. In order to completely eliminate this threat, all necessary legislative regulations and measures have to be introduced. It should always be

remembered that what may seem to be on the surface a seemingly minor incident can have an impact on the whole of society. In fact, this was the case for the 2011 London riots and the 2014 Missouri riots in the USA.

Politicians should not incite or tolerate the spread of hatred in their countries for fear of their future of political interests. For instance, fueling hatred of immigrants on the grounds that it will cause unemployment or perhaps create new expenses in one's country paves the way for greater disasters.

What needs to be emphasized at this point is that imposing more stringent penalties or exercising retaliatory violence is never a solution for hate crimes. The best – and most fundamental – method of struggle against hate crimes is to lay an emphasis on programs in the traditional media and in social media that promote altruism, solidarity, respect and harmony within society, which will bring along tranquility and peace. It is equally important to implement a system of morality that will encourage cooperation and unity among people. It should not be forgotten that achieving peace and harmony is easy; it is closely followed by a solution. The duty that falls upon all people is to constantly call upon the fundamental virtues that make us human, and cast out the egoistical and arrogant mentality from our lives.

[Adnan Oktar, who writes under the pen-name **Harun Yahya, has authored some 300 books in 73 languages on political, faith-related and scientific issues which have been read by millions of people, exerting considerable influence on both Muslims and non-Muslims all over the world.]**

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